

Jennifer T.

**Wilde, Oscar. The Picture of Dorian Gray**

**TASK 1 :Preface**

The preface helps you to understand the artistic background to the story. It invites the reader to look behind the story beyond the simple plot and find a deeper meaning. Wilde wants the story to be an illustration of his aesthetic principles. The preface also contains provocative statements which at the time caused irritation.

Choose three of these statements and discuss them. The group has to come up with a summary of their statements.


**TASK 2 Chapter One:**

1. The first chapter sets the stage for the coming struggle between artist Basil Hallward and decadent aristocrat Lord Henry Wotton over young Dorian Gray. Characterize the two older men. What seem to be their principles and lifestyles?
2. Lord Henry (or "Harry") has some curious views on marriage and on the masses. What are those views? Does Lord Henry make a few good points about these issues?

**TASK 3 Chapter Two:**

1. Basil introduces Lord Harry to Dorian. Consider this chapter as a seduction scene. To what would Harry win over Dorian? What are his arguments? Which one is most effective?
2. Whom has Dorian chosen to spend his time with by the end of the chapter?

#### TASK 4 Narrative features

While reading Dorian Gray you will encounter that Oscar Wilde often interrupts the progress of the action to describe sounds, sights or scents. Look through chapters 1 and 2 and find relevant passages that you put down into the chart.

Page	Quotation
19 26 31	7 "

#### TASK 5 Epigrams:

Oscar Wilde is famous for his wit. Many of his witty comments are often quoted e.g. "I die as I have lived, beyond my means".  
Collect as many epigrams as possible throughout the book.

Epigrams
P.7. "I can believe anything, as long as it is incredible"
P.8. "Conscience and cowardice are really the same things. Conscience is the tradename of the firm."
P.26. "People say sometimes that Beauty is only superficial. That may be so. But at least it is <sup>not</sup> so superficial as Thought is. To me, Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible not the invisible."
P.16. "Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship, and it is far the best ending for one."

### TASK 6 Decadence:

"If you say that a person or society is decadent, you mean that they have low standards, especially low moral standards." (Collins English Dictionary)

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is often seen as decadent era, a time before the storm broke. This time is also known as the fin de siècle.

Throughout the novel we encounter different forms of decadence. Choose three examples of things, habits or fashions which you think were regarded as decadent by Victorian society and say why.

What is regarded as decadent by our society? What sort of life style shows decadence in your opinion?

### TASK 7 Sybil Vane:

After her suicide Dorian comments, "If I had read all this in a book, Harry, I think I would have wept over it". In the book however, hardly anybody sheds a tear over the tragic event.

Sybil's death indeed is a tragedy and many people like sentimental melodramas, so write a really tear-jerking story about the young actress' life. It can also be a newspaper article etc.

### TASK 8 Dorian Gray:

Dorian sets out to satisfy "a wild desire to know everything about life". At the end of the story Lord Henry comments, "What an exquisite life you have had! You have drunk deeply of everything".

Describe the new hedonism that Dorian is living. What are the sensations that he is searching for?

Then compare your findings to our times and the things our youth is experiencing. Which kinds of desire does the "fun generation" set out to satisfy?

### TASK 9 Themes:

It is a widely used theme in literature that the protagonist (hero) sells his soul.

- a) Find examples of this theme in a handbook or encyclopedia.
- b) Whom do these people sell their soul?
- c) What do they trade it in for?
- d) Who plays the role of the purchaser in Dorian Gray?

Task 1

"To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim."

The purpose of art is that it can be enjoyed and admired by all. It should not be a subjective projection of the artist himself and must be accessible to everyone.

"Art is at one surface and symbol"

All is not just beautiful and something to be admired

it is a representation of something deeper. It doesn't just

show an object, it shows our basic concept and perception

of this.

"Art is quite water"

Art doesn't really have a function but it has always been present in our society. Looking at it objectively one could say that it is water but there is always a need and a craving for art.



## Task 2

### Chapter One:

Basic statement: he is immediately fascinated by Dorian and thinks he is beautiful and stunning. The way he looks at Dorian could be compared to the way one admires a beautiful work of art, it is like he sees him as a work of art created by nature, he also seems to want him to remain unfinished and unchanged, Dorian should keep his virginity, boyish charm and he doesn't want him to change or his character to be developed or influenced in any way, or if Dorian should remain as beautiful and innocent as nature made him

dread Henry: he recognises Dorian's beauty, his stunning looks, but unlike Basil, to Henry this appears more like an empty canvas, as if Dorian's outer shell is beautiful but his character still requires moulding and forming, I think that Henry wants his personality, his views and opinions to rub off on Dorian and make him into a person that so closely resembles him and on the outside has the looks that are able to manipulate all who meet him, it is very clear that Henry seems to recognise from the beginning how easy it will be to influence Dorian and takes it upon himself to be the person who sets limits and guidelines for him in his life

2) Henry views marriage as a social obligation and not so much a matter of choice. He believes that in order for a marriage to function a husband and wife should keep things from each other. They have to have some secrets in order for there to be any kind of intrigue. It also seems that he sometimes just says things to her in order to provoke her. It is as if he wants some kind of passionate reaction, even if it is a bad one. Just so that he is not trapped in an everyday, courtly life.

Henry has very clear views on the women and the English society. He wishes English people because of their pride. He says that they seem to be proud even of their negative attributes and will defend them as objects purely because they feel their society is so superior. However, if there is someone who could potentially tarnish their reputation and shed a bad light on the English society as a whole, he is outwitted and criticised by all and men separate to them. Even if these people know that in reality they could make the same mistakes and act in the same way.

Sever brings he says do make a lot of sense. It is true that it can be fatal to a marriage if it becomes too repetitive and both people fall into a boring routine. Some intrigue and secrecy must prevail, otherwise there is no mystery or interest left in a marriage. Regarding the women: his treatment of British society

is very apt. I think that some of the things he  
says about the English people could still be true  
today and ~~the~~ many of his observations still apply today

Chapter 2:

1) It is partly easy for Henry to win Dorian over because he indirectly offers him so much. He shows Dorian how much he knows about life and very freely and confidently shares his views and opinions which ~~also~~ Dorian. It gives him the feeling that Henry could help him and guide him through life. Dorian is fascinated by Henry's wisdom and Henry manages to give him the feeling that he could offer him more than Basil. In a very subtle way he manages to gain Dorian's admiration for himself. His arguments are that a man should give out his wishes and desires without feeling ashamed. He indirectly offers Dorian a life of joy in which he merely gives out his wishes without feeling guilty about doing so. This is a very seductive offer for Dorian.

2) By the end of the chapter it is clear that he has chosen to spend his time with Henry. I think that he is intrigued by Henry's lifestyle and his very advanced opinion. Henry has successfully lured him away from Basil by showing him all he has to offer.

Task 4

page 19: "There was a wattle of chirruping sparrows in the green lacquer leaves of the ivy, and the blue cloud shadows

chased themselves across the green like swallows . . .

page 26: "For nearly ten minutes he stood there, motionless,

with patted lips, and eyes strangely bright. He was dimly

conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work

within him . . .

page 31: "The spray of lilies fell from his hand upon the

ground. A furry bee came and buzzed round it for a

moment. Then it began to scramble all over the oval skeleton

globe of the hay blossoms . . .

page 41: " . . . and the two young men went out into the

garden together, and ensconced themselves on a long

bamboo seat that stood in the shade of a large laurel

bush. The sunlight slipped over the polished leaves. In

the green white daisies were tremulous.

### TASK 5: Epigrams:

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written.

There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.

To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.

I can sympathize with everything, except suffering.

Men marry because they are tired; women, because they are curious; both are disappointed.

A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?

It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But . . . it is better to be good than to be ugly.

To get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable.

I can believe anything as long as it is incredible.

Conscience and cowardice are really the same things. Conscience is the trade name of the firm.


People say sometimes that Beauty is superficial. That may be so but at least it is not so superficial as thought is. To me Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of this world is the visible not the invisible.

Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship and it is far the best ending for one.

Nothing can cure the soul but the senses , just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul.

I wonder who it was defined man as a rational animal. It was the most premature definition ever given.

I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their good intellects.



## **TASK 6: Decadence**

There are some examples in the book of what might have been regarded as decadent in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.


At several times during the book several characters refer to living out their inner desires and wishes and they discuss wanting to focus on what brings them joy in life. This could be considered as a form of decadence because it is a very selfish way of living. Society usually wants people to focus more on giving to other people and not living an egocentric lifestyle. Dorian and Lord Henry discuss that the world would be a better place if everyone just did what they felt like and thought more about their own desires and needs. The reality is that if a society were to behave this way, that every individual adhered to their own needs then a society couldn't really function. The laws and rules we follow would fail and everything around us would collapse.

Another example of decadence could be the way the subject of death is handled in the book. There is very little sympathy for the people who die and surprisingly it often seems to be looked upon as something that one should be ashamed of. Especially the suicide is looked down upon and seen as a sign of weakness. When someone dies the other people seem to treat it more as a scandal than a sad experience. There seems very little sympathy for those left behind and the way someone dies seems to be seen as a source for gossip. There is not a lot of compassion or grief.

The topics of Beauty and materialistic things are discussed very often in this book and also show some of the decadent sides of society. Beauty seems to have such a high value in the rich middle class society. As if a person with exquisite beauty can charm themselves into or out of anything. It is valued by so many of the characters far above intellect or compassion and is seen as the ultimate asset in life. This could be seen as decadent because it presents the idea that it is alright to mislead people and that your sins will be overlooked or forgiven if you are beautiful or have beautiful things.

Nowadays some of the things which are regarded as decadent are different to the things in the Victorian society. It is clear that nowadays people seem to be focusing a lot more on themselves and their own needs. It seems as if we are brought up to focus on how we can best achieve our own goals and our own aspirations. Another sign of decadence is the great divide between wealthy people and poor people. There seems to be very little attempt bridge the gaps between different societies and groups of people within one society. There are many types of decadence in our society added to that fact that most people are totally oblivious to any kind of decadence existing at all.

In my opinion lack of respect for others and being unaware of the effect your own actions have is a decadent way to live. In order for a society to function each individual must be aware of how they are affecting the world and what influence one has on the rest of society.



## TASK 7: Sybil Vane

### Headline ✂

As she sat in the quiet room by herself she couldn't help reflecting on her life. All that had happened so far, all that she had planned, and all that would now never happen. She sat on a small stool in the changing room of the theatre in front of a mirror. How many times had she been in that room changing into different garments, applying magnificent make-up which allowed her to become someone else and escape the harsh reality of her life. It had always seemed to her that when she became Juliet her life had more meaning, as if she now had a friend who understood her suffering and who was willing to fight through all the struggles that life threw at her. But Sybil had always known that she was not so brave. She obeyed her mother and stayed in the theatre because her mother had told her long ago that they didn't have the luxury of choosing any profession and that she should be glad that the theatre owner let them earn a living. Still as a child she had often dreamt of a day when she would become something else, something more. She had had visions of breaking free from the cage and showing the whole world her true soul and her true being. She saw her self as a heroine in her own play. She would be rescued by a white knight, they would fight through battles side by side having the most exciting adventures and in the end she would die a sudden, brutal yet memorable death, making her go down in history as a woman who loved adventure right until the end.

She sighed heavily and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. She saw a sad face with untidy hair and slumped shoulders. This was not who she wanted to be. She had never wanted to be this person. Yet here she was stuck forever in a world where she was little more than an insignificant side character in one or two scenes of the entire play. But Dorian, he had seen something more, something different. He had seen inside her soul and seen her true beauty and talent, it wasn't acting it was living. She wanted to show the whole world who she truly was. Instead she was restricted to portraying people who didn't even exist who lead more interesting and fulfilled lives than she ever would. As she watched her own reflection a tear rolled down her cheek. She didn't try to stop it or wipe it away, it ran down her face to her chin before dropping to the ground. A few seconds passed then she couldn't help herself, started sobbing uncontrollably. The thought of Dorian had created a searing pain in her chest and her heart had filled with sadness. Where had she gone wrong? How had she managed to lose the only man she had ever truly loved? It didn't seem fair that she now had to deal with the fact that she would probably never see him again. Had her brother been right? Had she trusted him too soon? But she had been so sure that she could rely on him. That he would be the only person who wouldn't desert her, who would stand by her and who would always love her. He was honest and kind and a good warm hearted person, one look at him was enough to be convinced of his goodness. Yet she had somehow managed to chase away that goodness. She had changed so much in such a short space of time that he could now no longer see any of the love he had once been overcome with every time he had looked at her. When she had met Dorian, she had thought that she would never be sad again and that she would now have someone who would be with her for the rest of her life. How wrong she had been. Now she was facing a lifetime of knowing that she had had all she had ever desired and she had let it slip through her fingers.

Tears were now running down her cheeks and her entire body was shaking. She knew that she would never recover from this loss. Life no longer had any meaning. Even if she was shown all the beauty in the world, she would see it all in a dark shadow unless Dorian was by her side and was sharing the wonders of the world with her. She thought of her mother. She had only wanted the best for her. She had encouraged her to become an actress so that the family never need fear that they wouldn't have any money. She thought of her brother. He had been like a father to her growing up and had always protected her and watched over her. Sometimes she would get so angry because he always insisted that he knew what was best for

her. No she realised that he had been right all along. He had known that she couldn't rely on Dorian to always be there. He had felt that his sister deserved something better. Now it was too late. She would never want anything else for as long as she lived. All she wanted was Dorian.

Her hands were trembling as she lifted a small bottle and pulled the cork off the top. She knew the deadly content of this bottle and she knew what she was doing. Yet she couldn't stop herself. She was left with one thought that this was the only option. She would never be free of the torture of life without Dorian unless she ended it all now. She felt sorry for her mother as she thought of who she would feel when she found out and her hands shook more violently. But Sybil knew that it was basically already over. She had already made her decision. If she didn't deserve Dorian then she didn't deserve life.

She lifted the bottle to her lips and slowly stepped towards the mirror until she was facing it. She gazed at her tear streaked face and her pale complexion and knew that in a short while she would be free of the agonizing pain in her chest. Her lips broke apart briefly and formed the word Dorian. No sound escaped her lips but she mouthed that one word again. And again and again. Until a faint whisper was heard, which seemed to be echoing around the room. Dorian, Dorian, Dorian...

No one was in the theatre to hear the faint thud against the wooden floor as her body fell to the floor a short while later. When she was found people spoke of the tragedy. Such a young life lost so soon and so tragically. They spoke of the shame it could cause the family, the selfishness of such a young and naïve and foolish girl. Though no one, in all the words that were spoken about Sybil Vane's sudden death, ever mentioned the true tragedy hidden among the side plots of this story. No one spoke of her life and the events that had lead up to that frail, broken figure being found on the floor of the theatre changing room. All anyone said was that now the curtains had closed on Sybil Vane for the final time.

that's excellent!  
a very different approach!  
+!!

### **Task 8: Dorian Grey**

During the first half of the book Dorian seems to have very selfish and fleeting desires. He sets out to satisfy his every whim and need without giving much thought to the consequences of his actions. He looks for ways to indulge himself and most of what he enjoys is based on materialistic things. He spends his time with whomever he finds interesting doing whatever he feels like doing at that moment. Being very young and naïve he doesn't realise what is actually good for him and what one must sometimes sacrifice in order to be happy.

In the second half of the book his lifestyle and appreciation of life changes. As he starts to realise the reality of what he has done and his conscience catches up with him he realises what his life has really been and how things must be changed. It is as if he realises that all material things are only temporary and that what would really satisfy his needs can't be bought. He seems to become a little less selfish and less self-indulgent. He has exhausted all the options there are for buying happiness and now he is lost, not knowing where to turn to now for happiness.

Dorian's early behaviour is very similar to the behaviour of many young people today. Very often pleasure and joy seem to be connected with things one can buy and expensive material things. Another aspect of the "fun generation" is the disregard for what is good for you. Sometimes unhealthy things and lazy, unhealthy lifestyles are connected with having fun. A lot of what Dorian experienced during his early adulthood is very similar to what the youth of today experience.

### **TASK 9: Themes**

In Dorian Grey the portrait takes on the burden of Dorian's sins. An example of another novel where the protagonist sells his soul is Faust by Goethe. He sells his soul in exchange for more powers and more abilities. He makes that pact with the devil to gain more knowledge and wealth. In The Picture of Dorian Grey the main character is relieved of his sins and gains eternal youth and beauty. Lord Henry is the one who seduces Dorian in this way telling him how easy his life will be if he maintains his youth and good looks. But it is Dorian himself who expresses the wish to keep all that he has at that moment and for others to be fooled by his looks and thus overlook his sins. It is almost like a prayer or an agreement with God which makes the portrait change in this remarkable way.

### **Task 10: the Supremacy of Youth and Beauty**

Oscar Wilde believed that the sole purpose of art was to be art. It wasn't necessary for it to represent anything more than what it showed or have any deeper meaning on an intellectual level. He lived his life according to this idea that art's purpose was merely to be beautiful. There are several similarities between Dorian's life and Wilde's life. In the beginning of the book Dorian is like a wide-eyed, young naïve boy who wants to see all the beauty in the world and believes that this beauty is what will help him achieve goals and is the ultimate aid to leading a fulfilled life. Towards the end he realises that he can't simply rely on beauty. He learns to accept that beauty has deceived him and the way he saw life and success wasn't real. Oscar Wilde encouraged the aestheticism movement and his art was meant to be a part of this. He even discusses in his books the fact that art should just be art and no more. However "The Picture of Dorian Grey" was first banned and later used against Oscar Wilde in his court hearings. Because it was said to have an autobiographical background and show Oscar Wilde's views on how he went about life. The same art which had at first been an expression

of aestheticism, something Oscar Wilde was very devoted to, eventually seemed to turn against him and contribute to his downfall.

### TASK 11 The Purpose Of Art

It is difficult to say what the true purpose of art it maybe that is because many artists want their art to represent something different for each individual. Very often art is a matter of perception and interpretation and it can't always be truly defined. When I think of my experiences of art I realise that very often the thing you want to get from it is no more than a beautiful image. It is wonderful if art can take you somewhere show you a scenery or a situation and not try to tell you how you should feel about it. It lets you draw your own conclusions and experience it in your own way. But if you look at the effect art has had through history it has very often been very effective in illustrating the mood of a particular time, or encouraging people to bring about changes. This is also very important. It can make radical political statements without harming anyone, it can sum up how a whole generation feels thus making it easier for future generations to enjoy and understand. Very often it is a reflection of the current state of a society which then develops into an art movement. But it can also be something very personal. It can tell the story of an individual's life, depict one moment in time, or portray the feelings of someone in a way one wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. It is very poetic to say that art's purpose is simply to be beautiful but our idea of what is beautiful can differ from person to person, and if it wasn't interpreted or talked about or understood we may not even be able to enjoy its beauty.

Excellent work, Jennifer.  
All your answers make perfect sense and show your excellent understanding of the novel.

100%

Jennifer  
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### TASK 10 The Supremacy of Youth and Beauty

The first principle of aestheticism, the philosophy of art by which Oscar Wilde lived, is that art serves no other purpose than beauty. Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty reigns.

Although beauty and youth remain of utmost importance at the end of the novel—the portrait is, after all, returned to its original form—the novel suggests that the price one must pay is exceedingly high. Dorian gave nothing less than his soul, which is a mistake that Oscar Wilde himself also later committed.

Go over Wilde's biography. In which respect is Wilde's life similar to that Dorian Gray. What happened to him, what happened to his career?



Oscar Wilde

### TASK 11 The Purpose of Art

When *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in *Lippincott's* magazine in 1890, it was met with harsh criticism that decried it as an immoral book. When Wilde revised the next the following year, he included a preface, which serves as a useful explanation of his philosophy of art. The purpose of art, according to this series of epigrams, is to have no purpose. In order to understand this claim fully, one needs to consider the moral climate of Wilde's time and the Victorian sensibility regarding art and morality. The Victorians believed that art could be used as a tool for social education and moral enlightenment, as illustrated in works by writers such as Charles Dickens. The aestheticism movement, for which Wilde served as a major proponent, sought to free art from this responsibility. The aesthetes were motivated as much by a contempt for bourgeois morality—a sensibility that is embodied in *Dorian Gray* by Lord Henry Wotton, whose every word seems designed to shock the ethical certainties of the burgeoning middle-class—as they were by the belief that art need not possess any other purpose than being beautiful.

Comment on this

Or

Write a summary of the novel based on the criteria on the handout (3-5 paragraphs)